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ON THE DUTY OF THE

EPISCOPAL CHURCH,

IN RELATION TO

SLAVERY:

BEING A SPEECH DELIVERED IN THE N. Y. A. S. CONVENTION,

February 12, 1839.

BY JOHN JAY.

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THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH.

At a sitting of the Convention Feb. 12th, 1839, "The Duty of the Church in relation to Slavery" being under discussion, Mr. J. Jay said,

I rise, sir, to make a few remarks with regard to that church, to which I thank God, I belong, in connection with this important subject—a church which has neither been named nor alluded to in the report upon this question, nor by any of the subsequent speakers—although I understand it is represented in this Convention by members of *Trinity, St. Bartholomews'*, the *City Mission*, and the Church of the *Ascension*, and I had hoped that the duty of explaining the peculiar obligations which rest upon her, to aid us in this holy cause, would have been assumed by some gentleman, better fitted than myself to do it justice.

The established Church of England, of which ours is a branch, transplanted to this country at an early period of our colonial history, we regard with

reverence, as our true mother, who has for centuries commended herself to the love and veneration of all who have met around the altar of her communion, or have listened to her heavenly teachings, or mingled their voices in the responses of her noble liturgy.

By our separation from Great Britain in the war of Revolution, the political tie that connected the church in America with the establishment of England, was necessarily broken, and she became in a political point of view, like the land which she blessed with her presence, free and independent; but spiritually the connection remained unbroken; and her bishops in making such alterations in the liturgy, as were rendered proper by the change in our form of government, solemnly avowed their intention to adhere to the "doctrine, discipline and worship" of the English church. We were to continue *one* in heart and soul; and enjoying the same purity of faith, and the same forms of worship, we claimed the privilege of glorying with our transatlantic brethren, in the constancy of her martyrs, and the piety of her divines.

Now I would ask if we have retained the spirit and the practice of the members of that church;

or rather if we have not virtually renounced their spirit, and departed from their practice, in a matter which deeply concerns the interests of the church, the extension of christianity, and the welfare of our country? When, in England, the question was agitated, not of slavery existing within the borders of their sea-girt isle, but of slavery in a distant colony—what was the conduct of the established church? and what the spirit which she displayed? Let her divines lending the influence of their holy office to the cause of Abolition, answer the question. Let her bishops in the House of Lords, and her laymen in the House of Commons, launching the thunders of their eloquence against the oppressor; and the church magazines opening their columns to the friends of freedom, and defending the religion which they professed, and the Bible which they reverenced, and the God whom they adored, from the foul slander uttered by the slaveholder—that the Scriptures sanction slavery, and displaying in this cause of mercy and truth, the piety of Christians and almost the zeal of enthusiasts—let them answer the question. And let the English Anti-Slavery Societies in which churchman and dissenter met upon one platform and uttered one voice, confirm the answer.

But enough—the Churchmen of England, although not as a body as zealous in this cause, as their brethren the dissenters, exerted an influence of which the clergy in this country, have never an idea. Thanks to the great body of Christians, who dwell in that glorious land, and to the God who inspired their hearts with sympathy for the slave—the battle there has been fought and the victory has been won; and the whole nation are now proving the truth of the promise that in keeping of God's commandments, there is great reward.

A similar contest has begun in our own country—one of far greater magnitude, of infinitely more importance. It is waged against a system yet more atrocious, and polluting not a small and distant colony, but half the territory of our own land. And what has been the conduct of the church here? Alas! for the expectation that she would conform to the spirit of her ancient mother, she has not merely remained a mute and careless spectator of this great conflict of truth and justice with hypocrisy and cruelty, but her very priests and deacons may be seen ministering at the altar of slavery, offering their talents and influence at its unholy shrine, and openly repeating the awful blasphemy

that the precepts of our Saviour sanction the system of American servitude.

Her northern clergy with rare exceptions, whatever they may feel upon this subject, rebuke it neither in public nor in private—and her periodicals far from advancing the progress of Abolition, at times oppose our societies, impliedly defending slavery, as not incompatible with christianity, and occasionally withholding information useful to the cause of freedom.

In England, the sorrowful cry of the down-trodden slaves excited the warmest sympathy, though borne across the wide Atlantic; while with us the appeal is heard with apathy that comes from the lips of our degraded countrymen in the very Capitol of our republic. The mouths of our clergy are fast closed, and the calls of justice and righteousness are less powerful than the fear of offence. A fact which, as a churchman I blush to remember, strongly indicates this apathy. On the days set apart for *Thanksgiving* in this state, in different years, several Episcopal clergymen, after recounting in their sermons our national blessings, proceeded to enumerate our national sins. They spoke of our lawlessness, our disregard of the Sabbath—our wicked treatment of the poor Indians—the de-

graded character of our newspaper press, and various others, and they named not, they alluded not to SLAVERY—the vilest, darkest system of iniquity that ever exposed a nation to the just vengeance of an offended God. Though Sunday after Sunday, they had put up that beautiful petition, in the Holy Liturgy, "for all who are destitute and oppressed" —and their people had ever responded "we beseech thee to hear us, good Lord"—those, who of all the inhabitants of this wide land, are the most truly described in that petition, were unremembered then. A stranger would scarcely have imagined, when those clergymen dwelt upon the favors God had heaped upon this people, when they spoke of our schools, and colleges, and churches, the extension of knowledge, the diffusion of christianity, and all the numberless blessings we enjoy—that there existed in this nation nearly THREE MILLIONS of people, oppressed in body and degraded in mind—who have never entered the walls of a school, nor learnt the coming of Christ, and know not the sound of the church-going bell, and whom in some states it is death to teach that Bible which is our hope and stay.

I would not be understood, sir, for a moment as resting the duty of the church in this matter, upon

what has been the practice of the establishment of England. Though every member of that church from the highest grade to the lowest, singly and collectively, in public and in private, had upheld slavery with all their strength, it would still be the duty of American Episcopalians to lend their aid to abolition. Our principles are founded not upon human laws, they deduce not their authority from human acts; the Bible is their basis, and the command of Jehovah to "do justice and love mercy," comprises the substance of them all. There is nothing inconsistent with the recognition of this first origin of duty, in reminding Episcopalians, that their relation to the Church of England, imposes also obligations of no trivial character, and that in their present conduct they are not only renouncing her spirit, but casting reproach upon her character, and impliedly censuring some of her wisest prelates and purest members.

Appealing not solely to the stern principles of justice and righteousness, but to the tenderest sympathies that adorn our nature, I call upon churchmen to rise in their majesty and declare themselves on the side of mercy. By their reverence for the church, as an institution venerable for its antiquity —adorned by the long procession of holy men, who have ministered in her temples—and hallow-

ed by the sweet memory of the martyrs who have sealed their testimony with their blood, by their veneration for the church, as "the great safe-guard of unadulterated Christianity—the defender by her articles of what is sound in doctrine, and by her constitution of what is apostolic in government, the represser by the simple majesty of her ritual, of all extravagance—the encourager by its fervor, of ardent piety"*—by these and all the otherties which bind them to her courts, would I appeal to Episcopalians to save her from reproach ; and especially to her clergy to use their influence to this end, with the people committed to their charge, whether it be done in the free converse of social intercourse, or in the form of pastoral letters, or whether the words of truth be preached directly from the pulpit. While the best modes and opportunities are to be considered, the duty is imperative and admits not of delay.

Mighty efforts are now making in the southern states, to extend the curse of slavery over new territories, and to perpetuate the infernal system to the end of time. If these ends are accomplished, we may well fear that the sun of our country's

* Melville.

greatness will soon set forever, for we learn from Holy Writ that God's blessing only resteth upon the people that keep his laws.

I feel, sir, that no words of mine can express the deep, the solemn obligation resting upon "*The Church*" in America, to protest loudly against slavery. Although some of the measures adopted by the various denominations of Christians represented in this Convention, may not be suitable for our church, I trust that her slumber on this all-important subject will soon be broken, and that while her missionaries are spreading heavenly light through foreign climes, she will awake in her strength to a remembrance of the degraded heathen in her own land, and will exert all her influence in this behalf, until they are not only blessed with personal freedom, but enjoy also that "better liberty" wherewith the Gospel can make them free.

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